

News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 16, 2003

CONTACT: Roy Stearns
(916) 799-1036

Experts Call for Humane Action Quickly

Wild Horses Suffering in Desert Drought To Be Rounded Up and Sent to Sanctuary

(Anza-Borrego Desert State Park) – California State Park officials today announced a plan to eliminate the drought induced suffering of a small herd of feral horses now residing in Coyote Canyon by rounding them up and transporting them to a wild horse sanctuary.

This emergency action is underway due to the extremely poor health of the animals caused by the continuing drought and low food availability and the expectation that the animals will not live through another hot desert summer. In addition, the expectation that the West Nile Virus will arrive in the Western United States this year adds another threat to the survival of the horses.

According to Park Superintendent Mark Jorgensen, "We agree with a leading group of experts who have said it would be inhumane to do nothing to save the horses. So we will be rounding them up later this week. After they are captured they will receive appropriate veterinary care and be transferred to a wild horse sanctuary where they will live out their lives in an environment more suited to their needs. These horses will be moving to greener pastures and their health should dramatically improve."

According to Dr. Greg Ferraro, equine veterinarian and director of the Center for Equine Health at UC Davis; "The health and welfare of the Coyote Canyon horses is unacceptable. To leave these horses to survive, as they currently exist, would be inhumane... The environmental conditions under which they exist are certainly not 'natural' for horses and not likely to provide for their long term survival."

— more —

Dr. Joe Cannon, equine veterinarian, San Luis Rey Equine Hospital added "In my opinion it is inhumane to allow these horses continued suffering in an environment that cannot adequately support them." The equine experts also pointed out that feeding the horses would cause additional problems and should not be considered.

State Park officials have been advised that timing is crucial to the successful removal of these animals. The horses need to be removed from the desert when they have had an opportunity to temporarily improve their health. The recent rains and the short green up period for the vegetation have made this the best time for a successful removal of the horses.

The horses are not native to Coyote Canyon. The small band, now numbering approximately 34 animals, has inhabited this canyon since the 1930's, when they escaped or were released from local ranches.

California State Parks, in cooperation with the UC Davis Wildlife Health Center, has been studying the horses to find better ways to manage the natural resources of the canyon. An ongoing study has found that most of the horses are not healthy, according to center director Dr. Walter Boyce.

Under Boyce's direction, UC Davis doctoral student Stacey Ostermann and a team of assistants observed the horses throughout the summer and into the fall. The study was initiated by the Park System in a contract with UC Davis to determine if the feral horses were causing any negative impacts to the environment or the welfare of the federally listed endangered Peninsular Bighorn Sheep that are native to this region. They found that many of the horses appeared to be in poor physical condition.

In February, several equine experts were airlifted into the canyon to assess the situation. Their reports, with the comments from Dr. Greg Farraro and Dr. Joe Cannon quoted earlier in this release, concluded that the horses' plight had deteriorated to the point where emergency action was necessary to insure the survival of the animals.

Coyote Canyon is located in the northwest corner of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, near the Riverside, San Diego County line.

— end —